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Gifted Is as Gifted Does

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Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

When it comes to gifted and talented education, once a student has been identified as gifted, educators make it a priority to push them to higher levels of thinking. Higher thinking is one of the desires of these gifted students, however the emotional needs of gifted students can often be lost as they are driven to focus on their academic abilities (Johnson, 2001). Often times the assumption about gifted students is that they come from a two parent home and that they will make good grades no matter what. The following modified verbatim examples will show the impact of not meeting the emotional needs of gifted students. The first case study, by Kayleen Williams, points out how gifted students often comedown on themselves too hard when they come across their first academic challenge (Edmunds, 2005). The following three case studies, by Emily Sketch, Nima Tahai and Kristi Rutter, show how gifted students often have to find a source of motivation after being engaged in gifted programs for a relatively long period. The final case study, by Kelli Cohen, reveals how a student almost completed his graduate studies with unidentified social problems. They will also demonstrate the transformation that takes place when the person within the gifted child is ministered to.

Case Study One

The gifted student I have chosen is 10th grader Sharah Puente. My Sharah is a student from my previous school, but I still have close contact with her, her parents and her teachers. Sharah is of mixed Hispanic and European heritage and is from a lower middle-class family. In 1st grade Sharah was identified as Gifted and Talented because of her exceptional reading ability. She was reading three to four grade levels ahead of her peers and already showed both desire and aptitude for science. She was last tested for G/T aptitude in 5th grade and has not been revisited since.

Since 5th grade she has been in honors and pre-AP classes in every subject except mathematics. She has gone through most of her education being unchallenged and succeeding easily. Last year, when she started high school, was the first time she felt challenged, and due to her previous easy successes, she felt inferior and stupid. I think the lack of instructional development throughout her early education set her up for this fall. I have been working with Sharah to increase her awareness of the limitations of her early education, and encouraging her to realize that lack of easy success doesn't mean lack of gifted ability.

This year, so far, Sharah is doing very well in school. She has learned to accept that not all things will come easily for her, though her reading and comprehension abilities are still quite exceptional for a high school student. She is making A's in all her classes and is in several AP and Pre-AP classes. She and I have worked on enriching her knowledge of class subjects well beyond the high school levels (much to some of her teachers' dismay).

Summary: Many students who are labeled as gifted and talented in lower education usually go through elementary and middle school unchallenged. This causes many problems for the student as he/she advance up to high school where they may encounter their first challenge in school. When this

challenge occurs, the students feel as if they have failed (Bainbridge). This is the result of missed instructional development.

Research

T.C. Grantham performed a case study on Rocky Jones. In this case study it was important that the student's source of motivation was discovered in order to keep him in the GT program. Rocky was a minority student. Minority students, especially black males, are underrepresented in gifted programs. Once Rocky was able to identify with his motivation for being in the gifted class and know the benefits that came from his gifted class, he was able to reach his potential and deal with the lack of colored students in his classes.

The teachers of the following three case studies, identify with Grantham's research, and have attempted to or have succeeded in finding the motivation of their gifted students. In cases where the student has multiple teachers, it is seen that if teachers would take time out to identify with their students, a student's worth ethic can change drastically.

Case Study Two (Sketch)

Eridani has excellent test scores, scoring post-high school in every area of Stanford as well as commended status on TAKS (standardized test for the state of Texas) math, science, social students, and language arts. His grades somewhat reflect this type of high achievement, with his lowest grade being English. In English, he loses points due to inattention to detail or forgetting to turn in homework.

This student exhibits an introverted personality. He participates in small group settings, but avoids contributing to large group discussions. He is prone to daydreaming and has difficulty starting projects, although once started, will continue them through to their conclusion. Although Eridani is not a behavior problem, he is often in "his own world," coming late to class and missing detention. He gets startled when he is called on and occasionally makes inappropriate or irrelevant comments. Unfortunately, he does not seem to have any close friends in class, and many of the students think that he is "weird."

It is my duty to find out what makes Eridani tick. I need to discover his interests and use them to engage Eridani in the class materials and activities. He was initially scheduled into regular English, and entered my class in late September, missing the initial student interest inventories and class building activities. I will set aside the first few days of the next semester to revisit such topics in order to better know Eridani and other late arriving students.

Summary: Introverted students often have trouble participating in large group activities. This avoidance unfortunately doesn't promote social interaction. Daydreaming and disconnecting themselves from the class, plague these types of students and it is a must that the teacher finds what makes the student interested (Hettinger, 2001).

Case Study Three (Tahai)

James Ranglers is a black male, age 12, who is considered an At-Risk student. He is not LEP and qualifies for free/reduced lunch. In fourth grade, he switched to a Houston Charter from New Orleans. He is very outgoing and enjoys being the center of attention, however James is more concerned with social interaction than grades. Although he scores above average on the Stanford Reading and Math

Tests, his current grade in reading was 73% and 84% in math, at the time of this case study.

Personality: James is the most popular fifth grade student at my school. He is physically more defined than the other boys at the school, as he is the tallest boy at the school. James has a very outgoing personality, and is popular with all the boys and girls. James is capable of performing at a much higher level than his current grades reveal about his progress in class. James is defiant when approached by discipline figures, and is quick to lose his temper when approached about negative behavior decisions that he makes at school. James has expressed to his teachers, and an administrator, that he thinks school is boring, and that he knows he is smarter than everyone else. James' effort in school has been inconsistent and his mother accuses him of just being lazy.

Academic Progress:

On Stanford Standardized testing in September, James tested over a year above grade level in both reading and math. James has been difficult to motivate academically, as he often exerts confidence about his ability and explains that he doesn't need to try because he knows it. When James is confronted with making mistakes, he says that he could do it if he tried, he just doesn't want to. The teachers are aware that this is true and have become frustrated with James's lack of effort. Teachers have noted that James is very quick to pick up material and often becomes frustrated in class and begins acting out. James is passing all subjects although his grades are not a reflection of his level of understanding. James rarely completes his homework, and participates in class assignments on an irregular basis.

Summary: The final solution by the administration at James' school was to place this student on a behavior contract. However, this produced little results. The problem was not that James did not know how to behave. Rather he had little interest in participating in class and therefore found other ways to occupy his time since he had to come to school everyday (Hangrove, 2005). These teachers didn't find the source of the "behavioral problems causing James' performance to be below his potential.

Case Study Four (Rutter)

Background

The student I chose to work with, Cody (not his real name), was identified as GT in 2nd grade. He is currently 15, a white male and in the 9th grade. He comes from a very broken home, his grandmother has raised him, his father comes and goes (from prison or just away), and his mother is completely out of the picture. When his father is around, they do not get along and have had physical as well as verbal confrontations. He has a lot of resentment and anger issues, which I can't blame him for. He is a very sweet boy who cares about other people's feelings, but carries a chip on his shoulder and reacts without thinking too often. Based on conversations with his counselor and grandmother, I found that he has control issues as well. He does fine as long as you don't give him a direct command. He's oppositional/defiant and would rather be suspended or put in ISS, rather than obey a simple order. At the same time you can ask him to do the same task and he'll be more than happy to.

Prior Evaluations and Grade History

Cody's test scores were extremely high. He mastered TAAS and TAKS with exemplary scores.

Several of his test scores were 100%. Unfortunately, there was a strong pattern showing significant drops in his grades over the years. He went from straight A's down to B's and C's, then D's and F's. I did notice one thing that was inconsistent with the rest. About every other or third year, he'd have an A in one class. Sometimes it would be science, other times, math or English. I asked him about this and he would say things like "oh yeah, I really like that teacher," or "Yeah, he really understood how to talk to me and made it fun." I asked what happened in the rest of his classes and he said he just didn't care. He didn't do assignments, turn in homework, or make any real attempt on tests. His test scores were higher than daily grades due to the fact that he did understand the material, even though he didn't practice it.

Our First Goal-Setting Meeting

I talked to him about creating a work contract for our English class. I let him know what the objectives were that he needed to understand and/or master, gave him a timeline, showed him what the rest of the class would be doing, and offered him the option of doing the same assignments, only at his own pace, or finding different ways of presenting what he learned. I gave him specific things he needed to accomplish, but allowed him to choose topics (example: he had to do a research paper, but was allowed to choose his own topic and define the depth of the research).

Summary: This student could now be identified as a twice-exceptional student because not only did his giftedness have to be addressed, but the issues that were present in his household had to be addressed, in order for this student to begin to reach his benchmark. Often times when students have problems in the household, or several responsibilities outside of school, it can place their education near the end of their priorities list (Milligan, 2005). It is key that these types of students know that there teachers are willing to support them and help them to achieve the highest grades they can.

Case Study Five

One of the most fascinating medical students I ever had the privilege of teaching was "Stan". He was mathematically and scientifically gifted. He graduated from high school and college several years ahead of his peer group. His academic record and SAT scores were essentially perfect. He gained admission to medical school without any complication. The first two years flew by without significant impact on him or his teachers. His grade point average placed him far ahead of his class and every other class to date. He continued unimpeded and unencumbered until he reached the clinical rotation. It was only then when one of his clinical professors recognized that Stan was struggling to communicate generously and graciously with patients, fellow classmates, attending doctors as well as with the ancillary staff creating many difficult politically incorrect and sometimes medically and legally compromising situations.

A more detailed review of Stan's background was performed revealing an impressive lack of extracurricular activities, social involvement and community-based endeavors. The admissions committee had been so overwhelmed and blinded by his outstanding academic credentials that they simply failed to notice the glaring deficiency of a well rounded life experience. Fortunately, we did not find any criminal or aberrant behaviors or activity. Stan did, however, require some remedial work in basic interpersonal skills.

We exposed Stan to a trial course of "Medical Ethics and Professional Communication Skills" which

was essentially a pilot study under consideration for integration into the general curriculum. He was hesitant to participate, failed to pass the first exam, and ultimately failed the course. He passed successfully on the second attempt. It was the first grade of “B” he had ever made in his academic life.

Stan is now a successful, highly skilled and competent surgeon with a sterling reputation and outstanding bedside manner. He claims the most important and critical gift any teacher ever gave to him was the gift of appreciating and attending to him as an individual (with strengths and shortcomings like everyone else) and not merely defining him by his grade point average alone.

Summary: This final case study describes a gifted student, who was saved by a mentor, who identified a lack of social skills when he was enrolled in medical school. He mastered all the material learned. He would have been unsuccessful in the medical field if one professor had not taken time out to confront him with his social needs. We do not know whether this student was introverted or extroverted as a child. We do not know whether he sought help from his teachers or did everything on his own. We do not know whether or not he interacted with his classmates (Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2003). We do not know whether or not he ever had to deal with making his first “C”, but it is clear that there was a lack of social development, during his early developmental years, that went unnoticed.

Conclusion

Although gifted children may be fully capable of excelling in the classroom, there are often social or emotional aspects that affect their ability to do so. These case studies point out, it is important that teachers and administrators put forth effort to help these students develop social skills that will help them succeed in the future. Emotional health is part of our overall physical health. These case studies also underlined the fact that a student’s giftedness can often overshadow lack of social involvement. For gifted students to experience success as they climb the academic ladder, it is important that their social and emotional needs also be met (Kanevsky, 2003). Textbook knowledge can only take you so far in life. There comes a point in time when capable gifted students can emerge as complete contributing human beings.

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